



Sustainability Matters

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Why the upcoming referenda are important for the climate

Unrecognised as green work, caring is essential to the survival of the human species and our wellbeing and could be meaningfully included in the Constitution, writes Vanessa Conroy of the National Women's Council

As we exit a year of record-breaking weather events and enter a year where care could be meaningfully included in the Constitution, bringing care into the climate discussion is an opportunity we can't afford to miss.

2023 was a record-breaking year in climate change for all the wrong reasons. It was the hottest year on record, with six months of the year reaching their highest ever temperatures. The extreme flooding in Midleton and Newry as well as a tornado in Leitrim have made it clear that even Ireland, considered one of the 'safer' countries in the face of the climate crisis, is not immune to its impacts.

The economy and day-to-day life in Ireland need to become more energy efficient and reduce reliance on fossil fuels. The government's Climate Action Plan 2024 discusses the need for more green jobs, alongside upskilling and training in green work. But the discourse on green jobs tends to revolve around creating new jobs or making existing jobs 'greener'.

Crucially, there already exists work in Ireland that has always been low-carbon, yet it fails to be included in the green jobs discussion — care work.

Care Jobs are Green Jobs

Caring work, both inside and outside of the home; paid and unpaid; and carried out by families, friends, and communities of all kinds; is essential to the survival of the human species and our wellbeing. It is by nature low-carbon work, requiring little to no extraction of natural resources to carry out compared to the jobs typically noted as green jobs.

Caring and care work will be centre stage in the upcoming referenda on family and care, taking place on 8 March.



Care work continues to be taken for granted in society — underacknowledged in the home, underpaid in the formal sector, unrecognised as green work. Care is still largely the responsibility of women the world over, with women in Ireland undertaking twice as much caring work as men.

This has profound implications for climate policy, and the impacts of the climate crisis for women. Caring for others impacts the way women use their cars, consume energy, and spend money.

Care-less Climate Policy

Yet Irish climate policy pays no attention to these links, all of which are well researched. The word ‘care’ only appears twice in the 400-plus page Climate Action Plan 2024 — neither appearance relates to the key role care work plays in society now or could play in a climate-neutral one. It certainly isn’t noted that caring duties are the reason why the majority of Irish women consider a car a ‘necessity’ in research conducted by Transport Infrastructure Ireland.

Notably, Ireland’s first climate change assessment, published recently by the Environmental Protection Agency, advocates for the prioritisation of wellbeing and equity in Irish climate policy — naming the valuing of care as a key aspect of this ambition. Not paying attention to how care and climate policy interact is a gaping oversight, given how essential this work is to society.

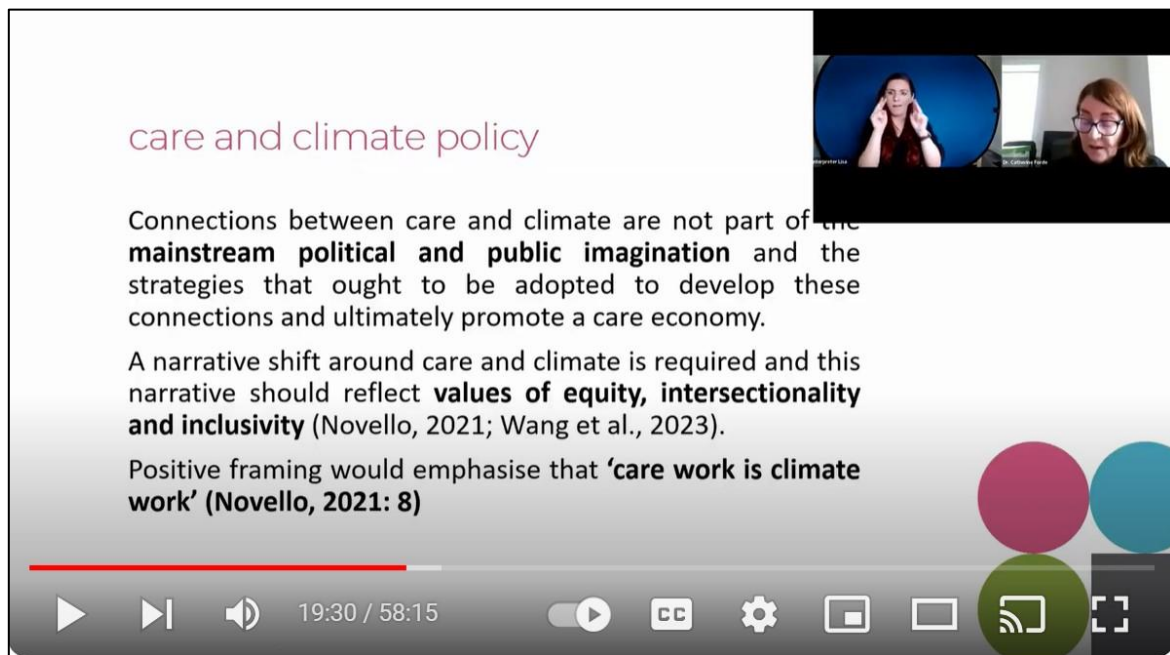
Transporting a pram or a wheelchair is far easier in a car than it is by existing modes of public transport, which has implications for who uses and benefits from the reduced fares and new routes. ‘Care-less’ climate policy inevitably affects women, as the primary givers of care in Irish society, the most — but it ultimately impacts all carers.

We are all Carers

Data in the most recent Census (2022) shows that 5.6% of the population of Monaghan (around 3,656 people) are people who provided regular unpaid personal help or support to a family member, neighbour or friend with a long-term illness, health issue or an issue related to old age or disability. By 2030, one of the key deadline years in terms of emissions reductions, Family Carers Ireland predict that one in five people in this country will be a family carer.

All kinds of families carry out care work, but the current Constitution only protects families created through marriage. This leaves an enormous variety of families in modern-day Ireland without Constitutional protection, including lone-parent families, unmarried families, and families looking after relatives’ children. This has implications for the 42% of children born outside of marriage in Monaghan according to Census

2022. Every family cares, and every kind of family deserves value and recognition in our Constitution.



Screengrab from the recent 'Care, Climate Justice and Upcoming Referendum' webinar hosted by Feminist Communities for Climate Justice project

Creating a Green Caring Future

Recognising care work as green work means labour which is so essential, but often made invisible, becomes a key part of the climate conversation. It means talking about care and affording it the same value, attention, and funding as jobs in retrofitting, renewable energy generation, and sustainable transport, among others.

The climate justice conversation — about the intersection of social justice issues and climate issues — is still in its infancy in Ireland compared to other countries. This upcoming referendum is a chance for the Irish green movement, often criticised for a lack of attention to the 'real' problems people face, to embrace a climate justice philosophy. It's a chance to make important connections between the climate crisis and local, immediate problems in the day-to-day lives of so many people – including the poverty that single-parent families, unrecognised by the existing Constitution, face all over the country.

Climate policy and climate movements which fail to recognise care work will ultimately lead to a future where this essential work remains undervalued and taken for granted. Valuing care, essential to the wellbeing of all people, will allow our society to become more resilient in the face of the sheer scale of transformation required for our net-zero transition. It will be transformative. An essential first step will be voting Yes Yes in the referenda on March 8.

Get involved in the Monaghan Yes Yes Campaign Group by contacting yesyes@nwci.ie

Vanessa Conroy is Climate Justice Spokesperson at the National Women's Council

www.transitionmonaghan.org is a voluntary community initiative promoting local and global sustainability. Our website gives a taste of what we do and we're always looking for new members to get involved in activities. This column is edited by Dermot McNally. For more info email: transitionmonaghan@gmail.com